


Networking – Dead or Alive?

An Occasional Paper from
Devonshire House that looks
both backwards and forwards
at Networking to understand,
assess and adapt to a period
of huge change.





Many think that Networking is about standing in a crowded room with a glass of wine in hand hoping to pick up some work.

Maybe it is. In fact, part of it is. And we do need to be good at this – each on our own way. More of this later. But true effective Networking is something much bigger and a major and vital part of our everyday life and in ALL organisations. Everyone needs to interact with others in some way – for whatever reason and for whatever purpose. Doing it well is a sensible thing to aspire to! (Note what we have to say about Self Drive Workers!) Face-to-face Networking sits at the sharp-end top of the Marketing pyramid.

The purpose of Networking is to create and develop relationships out of which informed conversations can emerge for mutual benefit – private or business – and primarily relating to information exchanging and new meetings with new people.

The current background is a complex mix of interacting factors:-

Covid, Technology, ESG and Brexit have all combined in having a dramatic impact on the ways we work – and lead our lives. Much of this continues to unfold – and looks likely to continue for some time.

Virtually instantaneous communications – in many forms; a resetting of the Employer/Employee relationship; a rethinking of the work/life balance philosophy; replacing line-of-sight management with trust – and education; the upending of the meaning of friendships; learning how to reconcile new concepts of individualism with collaboration and team-work – and short-term needs with longer-term relationships.

The emergence of Long Lockdown – best described by Matthew Lynn in a recent Telegraph piece (9.2.22) a corollary of Long Covid – which is Covid that takes a long time to disappear. For so many, post Covid, it has become very difficult to now change ingrained lifestyles. Change to what, we all ask? Change to what it used to be? Or change to something new? Or not change at all. So many workers – post Covid – are not changing much or at all. So many of us have become hard-wired to a new lifestyle by the Covid years.

The Institute of Employment Studies - <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-march-2022> - report comprehensively - based mainly on ONS statistics – on this.
there are now 1.15 million fewer people in the labour force than we would have expected to see based on pre-crisis trends, with older people accounting for three fifths of this 'participation gap'. Employment remains a full percentage point below its pre-pandemic rate (600k fewer people in work) while 'economic inactivity' – the measure of those not looking for work and/ or not available for work – is around one percentage point (or 400k) higher. Unemployment is more or less back to where it was before the crisis began, but in a significantly smaller labour market



Many – it is assumed - will come back into the workforce when they run out of money – and/or get bored. In a recent FT piece, Merryn Somerset Webb thinks that this is likely to be sooner than later for many, given the onset of hefty costs of living increases for those starting to live off their pensions which might increase – but not as much as needed. Also living off savings is vulnerable as its value will inflate away to some extent.

Our partner company, Working Free Ltd, (www.WorkingFree.co.uk) claims that the profile of the UK's working population of 32mn should be split between purely FTEs and the rest who are NOT FTEs and are heading towards a 50%/50% balance. (FTEs are full-time employees on a payroll.) Working Free refers to the others as **Self-Drive Workers** – and contends that this line of travel will become more obvious as Covid-driven disruption to ONS statistics starts to settle down. Working Free calculates that this split has, for many years, been about 55% FTEs and 45% Others. Currently, it is difficult to judge from available statistics exactly where this balance lies.

(NOTE that the Government is not now proceeding with its much-debated legislation about flexible working. Working Free takes the view that the UK Government is uncertain - even confused - about **atypical** working (the broader definition of gigworking))
Notwithstanding this, the relevance of this is that more of all of us are becoming more personally responsible for finding and managing our sources of work and income. And we need to get better at it.



Younger workers - tech-savvy and impatient and gradually getting themselves sorted out – don't really believe in serious face-to-face Networking.

After the immediate reduction in employment post Covid- and a difficult time during Covid - employment figures for younger workers are now recovering. These professional workers will, without doubt, prefer to do their networking online and through intermediaries. Many will see face to face networking as unnecessary and time consuming. They see socialising with friends as important but unconnected with career advancement – which is, paradoxically, the opposite of what is happening. They see what was typically described at the start of the Covid years as “*incremental information exchange*” being more for social pleasure rather than indirect career enhancement or useful information gathering.

They are probably more interested in task-focussed jobs and the technology involved and immediate money rather than careers. Interviews are mostly online and sometimes don't actually happen. The key criteria are technical and capable of being assessed online.

Recruitment is becoming more technology-driven - and increasingly woke influenced. Gender, Age and Ethnicity balance quotas can sometimes work against best choice. Many employers need to eradicate any sign of bias or external influence – quite rightly - but not always results in best choice means? Personality and “Fit” are seen as of lesser importance. Anyway, who is to say what “Best Choice” means? Active Networking, in this context, may well work against candidates.

There is a discernible view that face to face networking is about “inside tracks”..... and that this is getting closer to “unfair advantage” and “influencing” - again for advantage. All this, the thinking goes, does not accord with the “level playing field “ concept.

Example: *During a round of golf, one player asked one of the other players – a good friend - if they could find a role for his son – just leaving Uni – in his firm - one of the big four accountancy-based Practices. He gave him the right answer! What would your answer be?*

So what is wrong with “inside tracks”?

Might Networking “circumvent “ “proper procurement practices”?

Answers include NO, YES, DEPENDING ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES.....What is the point of Networking if it can't affect the outcome. Does “**political correctness**” come into the thinking? Might this be getting closer to illegality and/or being reputationally toxic. Might it be bribery?

Procurement processes are becoming more rigid. Efforts to promote best value often invite criticism for not doing that, particularly in the Public Sector - where pricing seems to dominate. Here, Networking is often criticised for cronyism – and with overtones of malpractice.

Was the current Government justified in directly awarding public sector contracts at the start of the Covid pandemic? We saw, in the early days of Covid, the Government making several hires and purchasing decisions that were criticised for cronyism and not complying with Procurement rules.



Networking is close to Lobbying. When does one become the other? Does it matter? When would Lobbying become unacceptable? Exactly, how do we ensure that decisions made are the best ones?

At the time of publishing this Paper, Covid is rampant. Those affected – or nervous about getting it - won't be currently interested in Networking. Or will they?

Faced with this unprecedented speed of change, how do we react and adapt?

- Networking is for everyone. Recognise that Networking is primarily about exchanging information and meeting others. (The water-coolers get everywhere – sometimes in unexpected places!)
- Research, create and manage a Networking Plan aimed at becoming well-connected
- Make your Back Office Personal, Prompt and Powerful. Start with an active CRM system. See below (This discipline will require something from you all the time!)
- Recognise that Face to Face networking is inseparable from the broader picture of Networking. Learn about Face-to-face Networking.
- Become very proficient at Networking - which involves finding out exactly what it is and how it is done.
- The UK is basically a service economy. The UK is (certainly was pre-covid) the second biggest exporter of services in the world.

Suggested customer contact strategy once you have established your product and market.

The Ten Times Table.

- ▶ Ten new Contacts in the month -
- ▶ Ten keep-in-touch with Contacts
- ▶ Ten Networking Opportunities/ Good Material in support.
- ▶ Build up to a working level of 500 broadly based contacts..... and maintained on a simple CRM System,
- ▶divided into 3 Categories – 1 - Active clients/ Hot prospects – 2 - Possible clients – 3 - Other networking contacts

Once you have established momentum amend to suit.

This Occasional Paper was primarily prepared as background reading for this Devonshire House Network Event:- Networking – Dead or Alive?

DHN Elbow Room Events are dedicated personal networking events seeking to replicate the style and personal interactions of physical events.

The Purpose (written 5.4.22) is to create a focussed Think Tank activity – broadly supported and stimulated by this Occasional Paper – pooling ideas and thoughts which will be disseminated through a Post Event Paper which is designed to be of collective value to those attending.

Whether it achieves its objective will be a judgement for later!



About Devonshire House Network Ltd

Devonshire House is a people-focused membership club for Director-level professionals in leadership roles who have an instinctive focus on the human side of enterprise. Our purpose is to create, for our members, thinking time and space for key business issues and where people make the difference. At the heart of Devonshire House are senior decision makers keen to discover and explore original thinking and information generated from all the Events we promote. Delivered primarily through our broad range of high-level Speaker Events, Forums, Panel Debates/ Discussions, Information dissemination and peer-to-peer networking, our Members and Members' guests discover more about organisations and how the effectiveness of their people can be nurtured and grown. Please see -

www.DevonshireHouseNetwork.co.uk

About Working Free Ltd

Working Free is a specialist career advisory business supporting organisations and their senior Director-level executives coming off the permanent payroll into an independent working lifestyle.

www.WorkingFree.co.uk

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